



The Amazing Lace-Bark Tree of Jamaica

By Steeve O. Buckridge

Clothing and textiles were valuable commodities and belongings in the lives of enslaved Africans in British Colonial Jamaica. Although Jamaica had no sumptuary laws that regulated enslaved people's clothing, enslavers were required by law to provide the minimum clothing for their slaves. The annual rations for most slaves was "as much Oznaburgh as will make two frocks, and as much woollen stuff as will make a great coat." The clothing rations was insufficient for most slaves since the intense seasonal labor in the fields combined with the weathering of garments often destroyed the paltry clothing rations slaves received. Moreover, the laws did not stipulate equal distribution of clothing between enslaved men and women. Consequently, enslaved women in general received less clothing than male slaves and slave women were expected to supplement their yearly clothing rations. Therefore, a few slave women stole clothes from their enslavers. Others received additional dress in exchange for sexual favours. Some slaves purchased additional clothing and cloth with money saved up from selling their produce from their vegetable garden.

Numerous slaves in Jamaica who came from bark-cloth-producing areas of West and Central Africa utilized the skills they had acquired in their homeland to obtain suitable raw materials for clothing from their new environment. They acquired some knowledge of Jamaican native plants and trees from the indigenous people, the Taínos, and they built on this knowledge and developed it further. Cloth was a valuable commodity within the slave community because most enslaved persons could not afford the cost of imported European and Indian textiles so they looked for affordable and more viable means of obtaining clothing. Beginning in the seventeenth century, many slave women in Jamaica turned to the art of producing bark cloth for local trade and use in clothing manufacture for members of their community. They produced bark cloth as their ancestors had done in Africa, and they passed these skills down to their descendants in the diaspora. The most popular form of bark cloth produced in Jamaica was from the lace-bark tree called the *Lagetta lagetta*, one of three species of the genus *Lagetta*, belonging to the *Thymelaeaceae* plant family. In Jamaica, the tree is simply known as lace-bark tree or "gauze tree."

The lace-bark tree has laurel-like leaves of ovate shape and rounded at the base. The tree ranges in height from six to thirty-two feet; the trunk as wide as two feet; taking fifteen to twenty-five years to reach full maturity. The flowering tree blossoms in April and May, and the flowers are white and produced in terminal racemes. The lace-bark tree grows in wet limestone forests far from the coast at an altitude above 1,500 feet, where the annual rainfall is over 75 inches. Within wet limestone forests, the lace-bark tree grows on the hillsides where the soil is graded to bare rock on slopes that form part of the sub-canopy of the forest.



The inner bark of the tree was used by colonized people in Jamaica to make ropes, hammocks, and baskets. During slavery, some plantation owners twisted strips of the bark into whips that were used to flog their slaves as punishment. Meanwhile, the slender branches of the tree were used as support sticks for yam vines in vegetable gardens. Among Jamaican slaves, the bark was valued for its medicinal properties. It was used to cure rheumatism and joint pain from yaws. Field slaves used macerated bark mixed with water to heal skin rashes and sunstroke from working long hours in the hot climate.

Most interesting was the texture of the lace-bark fibers that captivated many scientists. The European physician, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) became fascinated with Jamaican lace bark and stated in 1725 that, “What is most strange...is that the inward bark is made up of about twelve coats, layers, or tunicles, appearing white and solid, which if cut off for some length, clear’d of its outward cuticula, or bark, and extended by the fingers, the filaments or threads thereof leaving some rhomboidal interstices, greater or smaller according to the dimensions you extend it to, form a web not unlike gauze, lace, or thin muslin.”

Harvesting and production of lace-bark cloth was divided by gender. Enslaved and maroon men searched the forest for mature lace-bark trees to harvest the bark while women traded and produced the lace-bark cloth. In comparison to other forms of bark cloth like tapa in the Pacific that required hours of tedious and noisy pounding of paper-mulberry inner bark with wooden mallets into malleable cloth, the production of lace bark was less strenuous. The large branches of mature lace-bark trees were removed for processing, or narrow strips of bark were cut longitudinally from the bole of the tree. Often entire sections of the bark were removed at once, thus preventing the tree from regenerating thus killing the tree. On occasions whole trees were cut down for their entire bark. The inner bark of the lace-bark tree trunk was of a fine texture, almost elastic, very strong, but could be divided into a number of thin filaments, which after being soaked in water, was drawn out with the fingers, thus spreading the lacy fibers more than five times wider than the original width of the bark strip. The fibers were then stretched and dried in the sunlight. The end product resembled fine white lace, but could also imitate linen and gauze (Figures 3 and 4).



Many enslaved people in Jamaica found lace-bark cloth appealing for several reasons. Lace-bark clothing kept the body cool in the warm tropical climate. Seamstresses found lace-bark most desirable because it could be stitched into various styles. The local resident, Edward Long recalled, “The ladies [slaves and freed women] of the island are extremely dexterous in making caps, ruffles, and complete suits of lace with it; in order to bleach it...It bears washing extremely well...with common soap... and is equal to the best artificial lace...” Long’s account provides a fascinating glimpse into the fashion sensibilities of slaves and the accessories made from lace-bark. Long’s descriptions of the clothing made with lace bark reflect creativity and sophistication in design on the part of Jamaican enslaved women. Other types of clothing accessories made from lace-bark included bonnets, fans, wedding veils, shawls, and slippers overlaid with natural lace. Besides clothing, lace-bark fiber was used to make doilies or “fern mats” and runners to decorate tables and home furniture. It was used for window curtains and space dividers in the home as well as a sieve during cooking. Lace-bark was used as bandages and even as protective covering or mosquito nets for cradles. Lace-bark was a great substitute when manufactured European lace was scarce or too expensive. The lace produced was so exquisite that Sir Thomas Lynch, Governor of Jamaica from 1671 to 1674, presented the King of England,

Charles the Second (1660–1685) with a cravat made of lace-bark. This event brought the lace-bark industry some prestige and praise for Jamaican slaves' superb craft skills.

The emancipation of slaves throughout the British Empire in 1838 transformed Jamaican society and fostered a new and emerging middle class who desired greater access to foreign textiles and fashionable clothing. As ready-made European apparels and lace became increasingly accessible and affordable, the demand for lace-bark clothing declined. Many freed black women chose not to wear lace-bark because it was associated with slavery. Others were lured and seduced by the abundance of imported fabrics that was once denied to them and the ease with which these items could now be purchased. Some embraced European imported fabrics as a means of elevating their status in the new social order.

By the late nineteenth century, lace-bark became unsustainable and the lace-bark industry collapsed as the tree had become scarce from overuse. In the 1890s, the development of a tourism industry in Jamaica led to revived interest in Jamaican lace-bark for use in craft items for the tourist market. Lace-bark also received some attention during the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, which emphasized Britain's imperial power and celebrated the industrial achievements of all nations. Jamaica made its debut at the exhibition with a small exhibit of indigenous plant fibers. During the exhibition, Queen Victoria was presented with an entire dress made from Jamaican lace-bark.

Despite the international recognition, the lack of oversight by the colonial authorities and local producers, combined with poor harvesting methods led to the depletion of lagetto trees from Jamaican forests. Meanwhile, urban sprawl and deforestation deprived the tree of its natural habitat. The result was catastrophic. By 1906, official reports estimated that "only about half a dozen lace-bark trees were left in existence...." The lace-bark tree, that was once "in great plenty" in the seventeenth century, had dwindled to almost none. Sadly, today lace-bark is a lost knowledge and the skill of making lace-bark cloth has also been lost. Moreover, most people, except for a few specialists, have never heard of lace-bark. In recent years, a few lace-bark trees have been found in the Jamaican rain forest, but these trees are now threatened with extinction from mining and deforestation. Although the future of the few remaining lace-bark trees is uncertain, there is no denial that Jamaican lace-bark was a natural wonder and an important feature in the lives of Jamaican people.

Footnotes

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